The World According to Henry: From Metternich to Me
Diplomacy by Henry Kissinger
Review by: Michael Howard
Foreign Affairs, Vol. 73, No. 3 (May - Jun., 1994), pp. 132-140
Published by: Council on Foreign Relations
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/20046663
Accessed: 09/12/2011 17:19

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Council on Foreign Relations is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Foreign Affairs*.

http://www.jstor.org

Review Essay

The World According to Henry

From Metternich to Me

Michael Howard

Diplomacy. BY HENRY KISSINGER. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994, 912 pp. $35.00.

Henry Kissinger has never written anything less than *magna opera*, but this 1,000-page blockbuster must certainly qualify as his *maximum opus*. Its title is modestly deceptive. The term "diplomacy" is normally applied to the techniques and tactics employed in the conduct of international relations, and about these Kissinger is well qualified to write. He is dealing here, however, with a great deal more than techniques and tactics. His topic is the grand strategy, indeed the philosophy, of great power relationships, from the days of Richelieu until our own times.

The proper title of this book would be something like *Power Politics*, but that is a term that Kissinger seldom allows to pass his pen. Instead he refers frequently, and bewilderingly, to "geopolitics." He does not use this term as did its European inventors, Rudolph Kjellen, Halford Mackinder and Albrecht Haushofer, to mean the influence of spatial environment on political imperatives. For Kissinger "geopolitics" is simply a euphemism for power relationships. His use of it is reminiscent of the term "behavioral sciences," which was coined in the United States a generation ago to describe what had hitherto been known as the social sciences, but sounded to suspicious congressmen too much like socialism to qualify for governmental support. In the same way, power politics is a concept (though not a practice) so blatantly un-American that no foundation is likely to underwrite its study. "Geopolitics," on the other hand, sounds conveniently value-free, though the

SIR MICHAEL HOWARD recently retired from the Robert A. Lovett Chair of Military and Naval History at Yale University. Before that, he was Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford University.

implementation of some of its theories by German and Japanese statesmen during the first half of this century proves that it is not necessarily anything of the kind. Kissinger would have done better to have come clean and admitted that his subject was neither diplomacy nor geopolitics, as those terms are generally understood, but the subject that he has spent his life studying and much of it practicing: the politics of power.

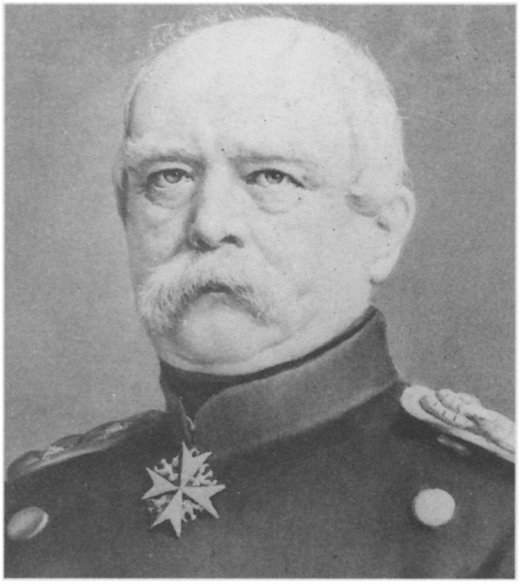
THE BETTMANN ARCHIVE

Metternich

The subtext of his book, however, explains why he could not do so. Americans do not take kindly to the idea of power politics, even when they are most blatantly engaged in it. From Wilson to Clinton, the rhetoric of American foreign policy has been to deny the need for anything so crude and to denounce the very idea as a European perversion. But for Kissinger, steeped as he is in the European history of the nineteenth century, power politics is both natural and necessary. The statesmen he most respects—Richelieu, Metternich, Bismarck, even Stalin—were those who recognized this and practiced it most openly. For power politics is not simply *Machtpolitik*, the accumulation, threat, and if need be use of armed force as an instrument of policy. It is based on the recognition and acceptance of the limits of one's own power. Statecraft, from the days of Richelieu to those of Nixon, has consisted in the identification of national interests, the realistic assessment of available resources, and the alignment of both in an appropriate relationship within the context of the interests and resources of rival states. If the resources are sufficient, a state may realistically aspire to hegemony, the destruction or subordination of all rival powers. But if they are not, as for the states of Europe from the seventeenth until the twentieth centuries they were not, the statesman must strive to enhance the power of his own state through explicit or implicit alliances. In Lord Palmerston's oft-quoted words, there are no permanent friends or permanent enemies; there are only permanent interests.

Kissinger has said this often, and here he says it again, definitively and at considerable length. For him the European practice, particularly as defined by British nineteenth-century statesmen, was not an aberration, but the norm for the conduct of international relations in any era. The American abjuration of power politics in the nineteenth century was a luxury that only their oceanic isolation enabled them to afford. In the twentieth, however, it was a disaster, whether it took the form of

isolationism, as it did in the 1920s and 1930s, or ideological crusade, as it did in the 1950s and 1960s. Richard Nixon, claims Kissinger, was the first American president, with the solitary exception of Theodore Roosevelt, to understand power politics and so to guide the United States back into the mainstream of international relations. (It is a claim to statesmanship for Nixon that could be made as convincingly for Louis XIII of France, Francis II of Austria or William I of Prussia, the patrons of Richelieu, Metternich and Bismarck, respectively, but let that pass.) But the United States cannot be Europeanized. The policies of its statesmen, however much they may be guided by a perception of the national interest, must always be made acceptable to an ideologically motivated electorate. That is the problem Kissinger faced when in office, and one to which, in the latter part of this volume, he constantly returns.



THE BETTMANN ARCHIVE

Bismark

1648 AND ALL THAT

About a third of this book is devoted to European politics before 1941, from the emergence of the states system after the Thirty Years' War in 1648 to its collapse with the triumph of Hitler. Some academics may lament the absence of more rigorous analysis, others the narrow focus on political elites and the little consideration given the social and economic transformations that provided the context for their policies, but it is a magisterial narrative, well-spiced with Kissingerian insights and ironies. The author is of course at his best on his familiar ground of post-Napoleonic nineteenth-century Europe. Whatever the philosophes may have said in the eighteenth century about the balance of power, the princes of Europe then still fought for aggrandizement or survival as nakedly as their predecessors. It was not until Metternich that a statesman appeared who had not only internalized the concept but was given the opportunity to create a new international structure that explicitly embodied it. His less perceptive successors allowed it to collapse. Bismarck recreated it, although on a far less stable basis. Again his successors allowed it to collapse. The First World War came about not because of the unstable power balance created by competing alliances (though it is not quite clear whether Kissinger accepts this), but because the German Empire was no longer interested in maintaining a power balance. The Second World War followed because the victorious allies were incapable of, or uninterested in, restoring that balance.

The withdrawal of the United States, the pariah status of Russia and the dithering of Britain, whose leaders had forgotten the lessons so sagely taught by their predecessors, left a vacuum that could all too easily be filled by the expansion of German power. When U.S. leaders came to pick up the pieces, their effort was in the belief that the balance of power, far from having prevented those wars, had been their cause. So they set about creating a new world order based on different, and erroneous, principles.

WOODROW'S WORLD

Like Metternich, Woodrow Wilson had the opportunity, or so he believed, to create a new international system based on a coherent ideology. The ideology, like that of the balance of power, derived from the eighteenth-century philosophes, who assumed an underlying harmony in nature that was distorted and broken only by human error and misperceptions. International conflict was at best the result of what Marx called "false consciousness"; at worst of the sinister activities of monarchs, aristocrats, or, a little later, "military-industrial complexes," all of whom, as Kant pointed out at the end of the eighteenth century, had a vested interest in war. For the Wilsonians peace was not a precarious condition maintained only by a constant and conscious balancing of power and interests, but the normal state of mankind, or at least it would be if only the artificial barriers to its maintenance could be swept away.

In this view American democracy was a microcosm of humanity, and nations could and should govern their relations by the same kind of consensus as the Americans did themselves. There should be an international town meeting—the League of Nations—to establish that consensus, and a posse comitatus to enforce it against offenders. As in domestic affairs, the security of one was the security of all. Separate pacts, alliances and military guarantees were as unacceptable on the international plane as they were on the domestic. Peace, in short, was indivisible.

When in 1919 the congress of the United States was called upon to ratify the covenant setting up the League of Nations, it understandably recoiled from a universalism that would have committed the country to undifferentiated and global intervention. But, having no tradition or understanding of power politics, it relapsed into the opposite extreme of isolationism. When the power balance in Europe collapsed in 1940, President Roosevelt saw that the necessities of the power balance demanded American intervention to prevent a German victory, but his electorate still did not. When the issue was decided for them by the actions of their adversaries, the American people went to war, not to restore a balance of power, but to punish the aggressors, enforce their surrender and put their leaders on trial. When peace was eventually reestablished, a new world order was created under American leadership based on Wilsonian principles, except that this time the United States locked itself into the United Nations and tried to provide it with teeth.

THE UNRESTRICTED COLD WAR

When the Soviet Union revealed itself to be, not a loyal partner in upholding the

American concept of world order, but a potential adversary, such statesmen as George Marshall, Dean Acheson and George Kennan accepted the concept of "containment," which was effectively an update of the traditional balance of power. But in order to gain public support their rhetoric had to be universalist. In fact Stalin, in Kissinger's view, had no serious global ambitions. He was an old-fashioned realpolitiker concerned with the cautious expansion of Soviet power, and he expected his adversaries to be playing the same game. He made it clear to the British that he would have no objection to their establishing military bases in Western Europe pari passu with the establishment of Soviet power in the eastern half of the continent. If the Western allies had been similar practitioners of realpolitik, Kissinger suggests, a deal might have been struck immediately after the war along the lines that Churchill himself favored: a Soviet pullout from Germany in exchange for the Finlandization of Eastern Europe. As it was, the American leadership could mobilize the domestic support necessary to achieve even the most limited objective of a power balance in Europe only by proclaiming a crusade, as it did in the Truman Doctrine. The global implications of this crusade were to be made suddenly explicit by the purely adventitious attack across the 38th parallel by the forces of North Korea in a region in which American statesmen had explicitly and understandably stated that they had no interests to defend.

The United States now found itself committed to a conflict that was not only global but to all appearances permanent. But it was one, Kissinger points out, to which the American people were temperamentally well suited. They were pledged to the defense, against the forces of an evil empire, of a world that, if left to itself, would be free, harmonious and democratic. Any administration, whether that of Truman or Eisenhower, that adopted anything less than a posture of total and undifferentiated hostility to the communist world was subjected to the unremitting attacks of its opponents. Young John Kennedy in particular, after the disastrous Bay of Pigs fiasco, had to show both his domestic and Soviet adversaries that he was prepared to live up to his rhetoric and defend the frontiers of freedom wherever they might be and whatever the cost, and he unwisely chose to do so in Vietnam.

It would be hard to find—apart from Korea—a region where the United States had fewer interests to defend, but it was there that the Kennedy and Johnson administrations believed that American resolution was being tested and that the decisive battle had to be fought. But Vietnam was a battlefield where Wilsonian ideals were as irrelevant as U.S. military power. Realpolitikers like Hans Morgenthau joined hands with pacific isolationists like Noam Chomsky to castigate a policy from which even America's closest allies tried to distance themselves. After five years it was clear that the Vietnam involvement was as much a domestic as a military disaster. In consequence, the American people, without quite knowing what they were doing, elected a president who, much as he admired Woodrow Wilson, shared few of his ideals, and Nixon selected as his

adviser Henry Kissinger, who shared none of them.

Kissinger has already told us in his memoirs how he tried to manipulate the balance of power to extricate his country from the Vietnamese morass. Although his success in doing so was, to put it mildly, limited, he nevertheless transformed the international scene. He treated the Russians not as criminals but as adults with legitimate interests of their own. He brought the Chinese into play as independent actors in the international system, and he destroyed the specter of "Arab nationalism" by regaining Egypt as a Western-oriented power. This he has already dealt with very fully in the two volumes of his memoirs. Here he summarizes the process succinctly and dispassionately, with remarkably little reference to the part he played. It was hardly his fault that the Nixon era ended in such humiliating disaster, and neither he nor his successors could prevent the Russians from exploiting the American loss of nerve that resulted from Vietnam, Watergate and the U.S. humiliation in Iran. But not only did Soviet triumphalism eventually provoke the Reaganite reaction in the United States, but, Kissinger suggests, it produced the over- extension of Soviet resources that led directly to economic and ultimately political collapse. In spite of the Wilsonian rhetoric and the mistakes to which it led, suggests Kissinger, the United States had actually been applying a doctrine of containment throughout the Cold War, and ultimately it worked. Whatever the flights of Wilsonian poetry in presidential addresses, fundamentally the Americans had been talking the humdrum prose of power politics, and the Soviets always knew it.

THE BETTMANN ARCHIVE

Wilson

Now, Kissinger believes, we are back in a multipolar world. He had tried to create one in the 1970s, with China, Europe and Japan as potential great powers, together with the Soviet Union and the United States, making possible a Metternichian or Bismarckian balancing game. Then only China had been willing to play, or rather China produced in Chou En-lai the only statesman who was willing to play; the Europeans were still too disunited and the Japanese too modest.

Today Kissinger sees better hope of true multipolarity. American military supremacy, though unchallenged, is of limited value in the modern world. Europe and Japan have drawn level as economic powers, and China is likely to do so during the coming century. Without accepting the "declinist" thesis that

some of his more apoplectic Harvard associates have attributed to Paul Kennedy, Kissinger sees the need for the United States to learn to function as one power in a complex system that it can neither escape nor dominate. The hopes of yet a third new world order in which the United States will be able to impose its pluralist-democratic ideology on a grateful world will go the way of those entertained by Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt. Once again America must define her interests and bring them into balance with her resources. "The fulfillment of American ideals," Kissinger concludes, "will have to be sought in the patient accumulation of partial successes." The Clinton administration, which in spite of its necessary rhetoric wants to involve itself as little as possible with the anarchic world beyond the oceans, can only take comfort from such cautious minimalism.

THE BETTMANN ARCHIVE

Kissinger

GOODBYE TO ALL THAT

But if the universalist philosophy of Wilson has been an ignis fatuus, a flicker of marsh gas only leading deeper into the quagmire, does that of Metternich furnish the United States today with more reliable guidance? Power politics (or, as Kissinger insists, geopolitics) certainly provided a necessary framework for statecraft in Europe between its two Thirty Years' Wars, that of the seventeenth century and that of the twentieth century, but how relevant is that experience likely to be to the world of the twenty-first?

My own judgment is: not very. We would not be wise to regard that limited slice of world history as a universally applicable norm and try to project its values onto the far more diverse yet interdependent world of tomorrow. The prescriptions of Richelieu could be as irrelevant as those of Woodrow Wilson, if not more so. During the two centuries between 1650 and 1850 Europe consisted of what political scientists call "perfect states," whose rulers owed no allegiance upward nor, more to the point, downward. They were absolute in their power to conduct foreign, if not domestic, policy. In their largely self-sufficient agrarian economies, transnational interests were minimal. The conduct of foreign policy was in the hands of small elites who, as Kissinger points out, were often interrelated and shared common values; shared more with each other, indeed, than they did with the peoples ruled over by the dynasties they served. For such elites power politics could be conducted as a game of skill. Even if they lost, the consequences were seldom catastrophic, and certainly not for them.

This system was badly shaken by the

wars of the French Revolution, but not destroyed: it staggered on for another half-century. By 1900, however, it had ceased to work. Political developments within their own countries had destroyed the capacity of the old elites to play nicely balanced games of power politics. Kissinger points out how even within the most autocratic of European states, the Russian Empire, the government was running scared of nationalist public opinion. In Germany the Bismarckian system collapsed less because of the lack of diplomatic skill on the part of his successors than because of an increasingly unmanageable Reichstag. As for Britain . . .

Kissinger is curiously blind to what was happening in Britain in the nineteenth century, and to its consequences. He quotes with understandable approval the statements by Castlereagh, Palmerston and Disraeli about national interests and the balance of power, while regarding their nemesis, Gladstone, as something of an oddball. But Gladstone was the voice of the future, his adversaries that of the past. He was the true avatar of Woodrow Wilson, and he was not alone. He represented a rising tide of liberal internationalism in British public opinion, which by the twentieth century was to become dominant. Edward Grey, Britain's liberal foreign secretary in 1914, knew all about the balance of power and tried, by his alliances with France and Russia, to preserve it. But his efforts had to be almost as covert as those of Roosevelt in 1940: the parliamentary majority to which he was responsible abjured the whole concept of a balance of power. When it supported British entry into the war in 1914, the rationale was not to preserve the balance of power but to protect the neutrality of Belgium and vindicate the rule of law. And the war aim of the British Liberals was the creation of a League of Nations, an idea proposed by the British philosopher Jeremy Bentham and powerfully propagated in the United States by emissaries of the British Union for Democratic Control. The idea of the League may have been, in Kissinger's words, "quintessentially American," but it was far more popular in Britain between the wars than in the United States. If British statesmen between the wars failed to pursue "the national interest" in the traditional fashion laid down by their nineteenth-century predecessors, it was not simply because they were more clumsy and shortsighted. It was because public opinion made it impossible for them to do so.

I make this point, not out of any British chauvinism, but because it indicates a deep flaw in Kissinger's analysis. The model for the conduct of international relations that he holds up for our admiration had simply ceased to work by the beginning of this century, not because of unskillful statecraft, but because the hermetic system in which it had been effective had ceased to exist. The more democratic societies became, the less possible it was for the system to survive. The Wilsonian illusions that Kissinger regards as uniquely American in fact originated outside America and have now spread far beyond, and it is arguable that the more widely they are spread, the less illusory they become. Further, in a world that is now so interdependent, it is questionable whether the concept of a purely "national" interest

makes sense any longer. Finally—but this takes us into very deep waters—there is now a question mark over the primacy of the state in the international system and its capacity to control those huge economic, social and demographic movements known as transnational flows. Given the prevalence of something like international anarchy, where would a new Metternich begin?

Kissinger's own sagacious prescription is that of all wise old men: *surtout, pas trop de zèle.* It cannot be said that his book furnishes any profound guidance to those who have to pick their way through the new world disorder, but that was hardly its purpose. It is history, on a splendid and massive scale: a magnificent survey, not only of the world in Kissinger's own lifetime, but of that ancien régime from which he derived his values and to which he now looks back with such understandable nostalgia.